

**"WE ARE CERTAIN THAT
COMMUNITIES OF JOY
HERE AND NOW"
WILL EMERGE FROM OUR STRUGGLE**

ANARCHIST BASICS



WHAT IS ANARCHISM ?



Put simply, anarchism is a political philosophy that aims to create a world in which people can freely cooperate together as equals. Anarchists struggle against all forms of hierarchical control, and champion freedom and egalitarianism.

Anarchists believe that people can organize themselves fairly without systems of violence or power telling folks what they can and can't

do. They tend to think exploitative and oppressive systems like capitalism, government, racism and hetero-patriarchy are both harmful and unnecessary, and that we should dismantle these structures and build a world of self-determined individuals and communities in their place. For over three centuries, this vision has inspired anarchist social movements on every continent in the globe (except maybe Antarctica.)

You may have heard anarchists put down as violent maniacs who want to destroy society and create meaningless chaos. Don't believe the hype. These accusations are often slung by the very people who are busy wreaking violent havoc on our communities for power and profit: bankers, bosses, politicians, cops and the media that always have their backs. To people like these, anarchists are threatening because they take action against the fear and brutality that maintains the halls of power.

The word anarchy itself comes from Greek, where the prefix *an-* means "not" or "without," and the word *arkhos* means "a ruler" or "authority." So *anarchy* literally means "without a ruler" or "without authority." Anarchism first emerged as an "ism" in 17th century Europe, when revolutionaries of the time started using the word to describe their outlook on society and social change.

Anarchism spread across the globe in the years that followed, and has since been applied in many different contexts. Anarchism's rapid spread makes sense when you consider that struggles for equality, horizontal decision-making and bottom-up popular power are common to most societies across the planet.

provides a collectively managed credit and savings system.

Relationships like these are a good survival strategy for people who are marginalized and lack resources, or folks who can't get bank accounts or loans due to immigration status or bad credit. Micro-loans allow people to do things they couldn't normally afford, and savings provide a safety net for emergencies or funds for big celebrations. Even better, this system undermines normal capitalist relations: no contracts are signed, no interest is charged, and no one is trying to make a profit. Instead, the motivation is reciprocity and a commitment to create solidarity and trust among participants.

And that's just one example. There are an unlimited number of mutual aid projects that you could start in your own community! Some ideas include: forming a childcare cooperative with other parents, growing food and distributing it locally, establishing a worker-run cooperative business, starting a monthly free store where people share things they want to give away for free, and more. Try it out!

FURTHER READING

Anarchist FAQ
Ian McKay

Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook
CrimethInc. Workers Collective

Anarchy Alore!: Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory
Uri Gordon

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WHAT IS MUTUAL AID ?

Mutual aid is the establishment of mutually beneficial relationships between people, in a way that encourages cooperation instead of competition. In the 19th century, anarchists popularized mutual aid as the fundamental organizing principle of human communities, in opposition to the dog-eat-dog social Darwinism that was taken for granted at the time. Contemporary anarchists often rely on this basic principle as a way of meeting their needs in cooperative, creative ways.

Our society is organized around the idea that we need to compete with each other for money, and that someone without money has no way to meet his or her basic needs. Yet all of us, even those of us who don't have cash, still possess a wealth of skills, knowledge and ideas that we can exchange with the people around us. If we can share these things among ourselves in a way that meets our needs collectively, we won't have to compete with one another in order to get bosses and CEOs to pay us for them.

Mutual aid exchanges generally involve sharing something with another person and getting something in return, often without the use of cash. Barter, trade



Participants share and enjoy free items and skill-shares at Really Really Free Markets

and straight-up giving can provide a way to meet our basic needs, while contributing what we have to the common good. Exchanges like these teach us to value people for their talents and the things we can share, instead of seeing each other as only bosses, employees or consumers.

The most important part of mutual aid is the creation of community, even if money is

involved. One example is a collective savings and credit system organized among friends, family or neighbors. In these groups, sometimes called "susus" or "asociaciones," participants pool a certain amount of money every week or month, and give these funds to one member of the group to use on things they couldn't otherwise afford. The recipient rotates each time money is pooled, and a little bit is set aside each time for savings. This simple system

WHAT IS DIRECT ACTION ?

Direct action means cutting out the middleman--solving problems yourself instead of relying on authorities or outside institutions to solve them for you. Any action that sidesteps representatives and regulations to accomplish goals directly is direct action.

In a society where political and economic power are hoarded in the hands of an elite, we are all taught to ask powerful people and institutions to solve the problems we see, instead of addressing things ourselves. In return for occasionally having our needs taken into account, we are expected to act as obedient workers, model citizens and rabid consumers. This is a bad deal, since powerful institutions usually offer only minor, insignificant reforms to keep us off their backs, while in the meantime, our working, consuming and voting keeps them rich and powerful.

Direct action challenges this status quo by empowering people to act in their own lives. Instead of scrounging for money to buy an abandoned building from a slumlord, take it over and run a community center out of it! Instead of begging politicians to fund an ineffective city health program, grow healthy food in an empty lot and distribute it locally!

There are countless scenarios in which you might want to use direct action. Maybe corrupt politicians are planning to bulldoze your neighborhood to build a highway, and you want to prevent their zoning meeting from happening instead of just holding a sign outside. Maybe you want to organize a festive, community-oriented event like a street party without going through the parks department. Direct action can plant guerilla gardens in abandoned lots and defend them from greedy developers; it can take over workplaces, or it can shut down government offices. Whether you're acting in secret with a trusted friend, or in a mass action with thousands of comrades, the basic elements are the same.

You can join together with your friends and comrades, and change the world around you--go for it! And remember: Direct Action Gets The Goods!

WHAT IS AN AFFINITY GROUP ?

“This anarchist direct action stuff sounds pretty cool,” you’re saying, “But I can’t do everything alone. How can I change the world, without working for some big organization or government that never seems to make significant change?” It’s easy: form an affinity group.

An affinity group is a small group of 5 to 20 people who work together autonomously on direct actions or other projects. You can form an affinity group with your friends, people from your community, workplace, or organization.

Affinity groups decide on their own what they want to do and how they want to do it, and aren’t obliged to take orders from any person on top. As such, they challenge top-down decision-making and organizing, and empower those involved to take direct action in the world around them. Affinity groups can make decisions in whatever way they see fit, but they generally use some form of consensus or direct democracy to decide on goals and tactics. Affinity groups by nature are decentralized and non-hierarchical, two important principles of anarchist organizing and action.

An affinity group could be a relationship that lasts for years among a group of friends and activists, or it could be a week long relationship based around a single action. Either way, it is important to join an affinity group that is best suited to you and your interests.

If you are forming an affinity group in your city or town, find friends or fellow activists who have similar issue interests, and thus would want to engage in similar actions. Also, look for people who would be willing to use similar tactics—if you want to do relatively high risk blockades, someone who does not want to be in that situation may not want to be in an affinity group with you. That person could do media or medic work, but it may not be best if they are uncomfortable around certain direct action tactics.

Affinity groups have a long and interesting past, owing much to the anarchists and workers of Spain and the anarchists and radicals today who use affinity groups, non-hierarchical structures, and consensus decision making in direct action and organizing.

In that case, people can raise the concerns with the proposal in different ways. Participants can block the proposal, meaning they feel so strongly against it that they will prevent the decision from moving ahead. If even one person blocks, the proposal is prevented from going through, and discussion resumes until a new proposal emerges or the old one is modified. Alternately, participants can stand aside, meaning that they have qualms with the decision but won’t prevent it from being made. They can state their concerns to the group, which makes note of it for the future, and the decision moves ahead.

- Using a decision-making process with more options than simply “for” or “against” allows everyone to participate in the creation of proposals, and takes seriously everyone’s concerns with a particular course of action. Blocks make sure that group decisions don’t override the needs of individuals within the group, and stand asides allow the group to judge how strong the consensus behind a particular decision really is.

Consensus processes can be fairly formal in large groups, or can happen organically in small groups with little added effort. Some large consensus processes may require two or even three blocks to prevent a decision from being made (“consensus minus two”), while others may only require a proportion of the room to agree to a proposal for it to continue (“2/3 consensus”). Still others may prevent a decision from going through if the proportion of stand asides is too high.

The possibilities are endless, and can be customized to the needs of your group!

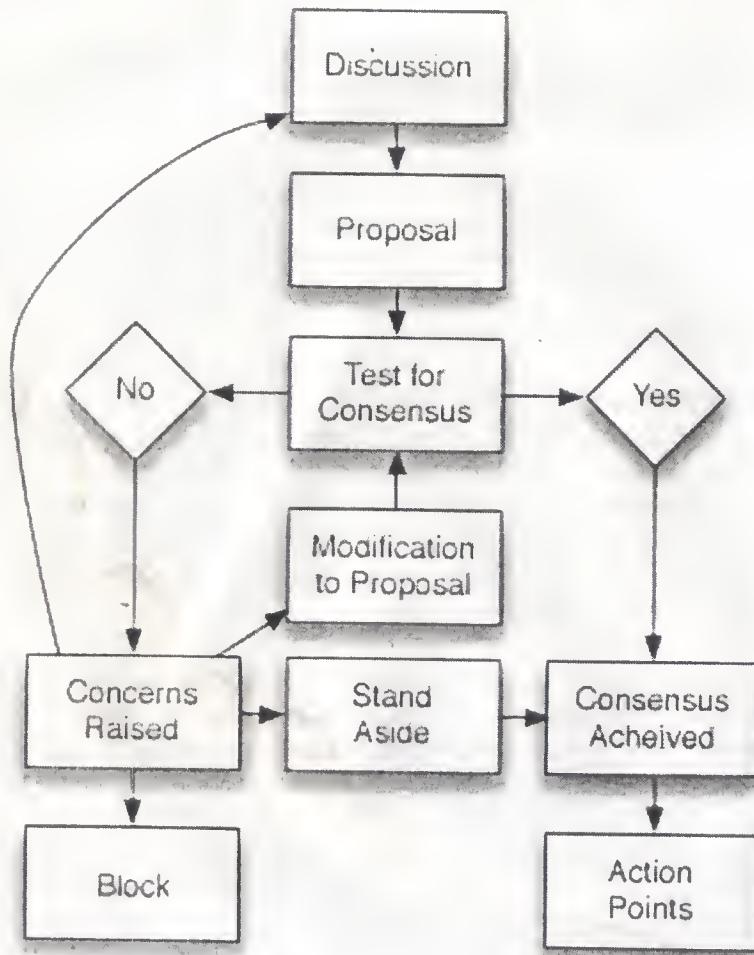


An affinity group makes a collective decision in the streets during anti-G20 protests, Australia 2006

WHAT IS CONSENSUS ?

Consensus is a way of making decisions that creatively combines the input of everyone in a group. Instead of voting on proposals that a few leaders come up with, consensus methods emphasize discussion and modification of proposals, and try to encourage unanimous or near-unanimous decisions.

In a formal consensus process, a group discusses a particular issue until someone synthesizes a proposal to put before the group. A "facilitator" who moves the discussion along then tests for consensus, resulting in either an instant unanimity decision, or a situation in which the group still feels hesitant.



What can affinity groups do?

Anything! They can be used in massive protests or small, clandestine actions. Affinity groups can be used to drop a banner, blockade a road, change the message on a massive billboard, do street theater, provide back-up for other affinity groups, decorate buildings with revolutionary slogans, etc...There can even be affinity groups who take on particular tasks in a large protest setting. For instance, there could be a roving affinity group made up of street medics, or an affinity group who brings food and water to people blockading intersections.



Protesters blockade roads, Argentina 2001.

What makes affinity groups so effective for actions is that they can remain creative and independent and plan out their own action without an organization or boss dictating to them what can and can't be done. Thus, there are an endless amount of possibilities for what affinity groups can do. Form an affinity group, be creative and remember: direct action gets the goods!

Affinity Group Roles

There are many roles that one could fill in an affinity group. These include, but are not limited to:

Medic - An affinity group may want to have someone who is a trained street medic who can deal with any medical or health issues during actions.

Media - If you are doing an action which plans to draw corporate media attention, a person in the affinity group could be empowered to talk to reporters and act as a spokesperson. He or she would want to practice what to say beforehand.

Vibes-watcher - This person could help maintain the general wellness of the group: water, snacks, massages, and encouragement by starting a song or chant. This isn't always necessary, but may be helpful in long actions in which people could get tired or irritable as the day wears on.

Lookout - It is often helpful to designate one person to monitor the physical surroundings of the group during an action. This could include watching for cars and safety hazards while people are in the street, keeping track of nearby police movements, and stopping traffic if necessary.

Arrest-able members - This depends on what kind of direct action you are doing. Some actions may require a certain number of people willing to get arrested, or some parts of an action may need a minimum number of arrestables to be successful. Regardless, it is important to know who in the action is willing to get arrested, and who wants to avoid arrest if at all possible, so your group can distribute roles accordingly.

Jail Support - This person can stay far away from the action but keep in touch by cell phone. He or she can keep track of all the names, health information and emergency contacts for affinity group members. If people are arrested, he or she can go to the jail, talk with lawyers, advocate for the arrestees, track their cases, and so on.

Whether your affinity group is taking action in a mass protest or not, there are a range of roles that could be necessary to pull off your plan of action, even beyond what is included here. Other roles might include: scouts, police liaisons, media documenters, distractions, people to transport materials,

people to make decisions for the group in high-pressure environments, and more!

Where did affinity groups come from?

The idea of affinity groups comes out of the anarchist and workers movement that was created in the late 19th century and fought fascism



EAI militants fight fascism during the Spanish Civil War.

To avoid the dilution or subversion of your collective's politics or goals, the group should be explicit about what it exists to do. Establishing a set of core principles with founding collective members is a good idea. Groups with clearly identified politics and goals are less susceptible to confusion and manipulation.

Troubleshooting Common Group Problems

Endless meetings with little action. Do anything together, no matter how small (e.g., taking some time during a regular meeting to write a government official or setting up a leafletting event) can give an important feeling of accomplishment while beginning the groundwork for a more substantial project.

Failure to attract, integrate, and hold new members. Brainstorm ideas for outreach and implement these ideas. Make every new person feel welcome and immediately involved.

Leader or key organizer leaves. Though it is sometimes more efficient in the short run to have the "best" person do a particular task., it is much better in the long run to encourage others to take initiative, responsibility, and leadership. Create opportunities for everyone in the group to take on important roles at different times.

Responsibilities not adequately shared. A process of rotating responsibility can be regularized to promote a decentralization of skills, thus strengthening the movement. Set a time limit (e.g., every 3 weeks) to rotate convening and facilitating meetings, etc. Schedule group workshops for certain skills (e.g., writing and designing leaflets, speaking, fund raising). Rotating tasks also helps ensure that the same person isn't always stuck with the annoying responsibilities like setup and cleaning.

Lack of funding. Even tiny collectives need money to print fliers and cover random costs! Establish a minimal dues system for regular members (\$1 a week or \$5 a month) just to meet basic operating expenses. Plan a raffle, garage sale, film showing. Brainstorm other ways to get funding.

Group is too large. Split the group up, either by geography, areas of interests, or meeting time. This will keep meetings from getting too cumbersome, and trying to do too many different things at once.

WHAT IS A COLLECTIVE ?

A collective is a permanent organizational grouping that exists to accomplish a range of tasks, achieve a goal or maintain a permanent project. Collective members usually share the same political views--in fact, they are often united as a collective by their political views specifically. Most collectives are local in scope, since they are often based in local communities and their members live relatively close to each other.

On a small scale, collectives are not very different from affinity groups. However, small groups that refer to themselves as collectives usually work on long term projects like publishing a magazine, or running a community space, or operating a cooperative business. Affinity groups can theoretically do anything, but typically affinity groups often focus on short term goals and tasks. A collective, on the other hand, focuses on long term goals and permanent projects.



Common Ground Collective provides some of the first relief efforts in New Orleans after Katrina, 2005

collectives. Like affinity groups, collectives often make decisions using some form of consensus or direct democracy, making a smaller size preferable.

Tips on Forming and Maintaining a Collective

Try to bring people into your collective that incorporate as many key skills that are relevant to accomplishing your goals as possible.

Take action with a specific focus, within the context of your broader concerns. A “scattershot” approach to your collective’s activity will likely end in frustration.

in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish Anarchist movement is an exhilarating example of a movement that was able to reorganize much of society based on decentralization, direct democracy and the principles behind them.

In Spain in the late 1800s, circles of good friends, called “tertulias” would meet at cafes to discuss ideas and plan actions. It was a period of intense class conflict in Europe and of local insurrection and struggle in Spain, and soon the Anarchist Organization of the Spanish Region made this traditional form (tertulias) the basis of its organization.



Affinity groups occupy Seabrook, 1977.

Decades later, the Iberian Anarchist Federation, which at its high point boasted 50,000 anarchist members, organized into affinity groups and confederated into local, regional, and national councils. Wherever several FAI affinity groups existed, they formed a local federation. Local federations were coordinated by committees made up of one mandated delegate from each affinity group. Mandated delegates were sent from local federations to regional committees and finally to the Peninsular Committee. Affinity groups remained autonomous as they carried out education, organized and supported local struggles. The intimacy of the groups made police infiltration difficult.

The idea of large-scale affinity group based organization was planted in the United States on April 30, 1977 when 2,500 people, organized into affinity groups, occupied the Seabrook, New Hampshire nuclear power plant. The growing anti-nuclear power and disarmament movements adopted this mode, and used it in many successful actions throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Since then, it has been used by the counter-globalization, queer and trans, and earth liberation movements, among many others.

Most recently, affinity groups have been used in the 1999 mass actions in Seattle against the World Trade Organization, as well as St. Paul and Denver against the 2008 Republican and Democratic National Conventions.

WHAT IS A CLUSTER

AND A SPOKESCOUNCIL?

A cluster is a grouping of affinity groups that come together to work on a certain task or part of a larger action. A cluster might be responsible for blockading one of many areas, or organizing one day of a multi-day action, or putting together and performing a mass street theater performance. Clusters could be organized around where affinity groups are from (example: Mott Haven cluster), an issue or identity (examples: black and brown cluster or anti-prison cluster), or action interest (examples: medics or roving blockades cluster).

A spokescouncil is the larger organizing structure used in the affinity group model to coordinate a mass action. Each affinity group (or cluster) empowers a “spoke” to go to a spokescouncil meeting to coordinate with other affinity groups or clusters on important issues for the action. For instance, affinity groups might need to decide on a common legal/jail strategy, possible tactical issues, meeting places, and many other logistics.

Spokes may or may not be empowered to make decisions on behalf of their cluster or affinity group. Some spokes may be empowered to decide things at the spokescouncil on the condition that they report back to their group and ratify all decisions; others may only be able to make decisions about particular issues; and still others may only be empowered to share and gather information on behalf of their group. A spokescouncil does not take away an individual affinity group’s autonomy within an action--affinity groups make their own decisions about what they want to do in the streets.

